

Gathering Information



Office of Inspector General
Office of Evaluation and Inspections

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Introduction

*In the first two OEI Technical Assistance Guides—Focusing the Inspection and Targeting the Information Needed—we discussed nine of the main questions necessary to design an Inspection. By now we know **what** the Inspection will address and how the inspection will proceed, including which of the possible methods the Inspection will use to gather needed information.*

This guide discusses, in more detail, how Inspections staff actually use each of these methods to gather needed information. Specifically, this guide discusses different techniques for eliciting and recording information, gaining access to different types of sources, the importance of pilot testing, and ethical concerns in gathering information.

Eliciting and Recording the Needed Information

Whichever methods are used in an Inspection, the main task of information-gathering is to elicit and record the exact information needed to address Inspection issues. How this is accomplished depends on the particular method being used.

Computerized Extraction

For computerized extraction of data from existing data bases or from reporting systems, the task is to specify precisely which quantitative data are needed. It is almost certain that these sources will contain far more information than Inspection staff need, and extracting the appropriate subset of information is critical. To do so, Inspection staff must fully understand both the content and the format of the data base or reporting system.

Unfortunately, as we discussed in Guide #2, it can be difficult to obtain adequate documentation of data bases or reporting systems. Inspection staff may find that a data base contains a variable (e.g., “satisfaction with the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) services’ ”), but the accompanying documentation may not explain how this variable was measured, what values it can take, how extreme scores were handled, whether certain values were combined to form indexes, or how many respondents failed to provide this information. Without this documentation, it is impossible to know if this particular variable can be meaningfully compared to other measures of satisfaction obtained *via* other methods.

If this documentation is available, or if it can be reconstructed in some way, Inspections staff then consider, one by one, whether each piece of data is needed for the Inspection. Inspections staff create a master list of needed variables, and they present this list to the person maintaining the data base or reporting system. Depending on the circumstances, the needed variables might be listed by variable name or by location within the data base or reporting system.

For all data extractions, Inspections staff need special computer hardware and software capabilities. Specifically, they need a sufficiently large computer to receive, store, and manipulate the data, software to accomplish these procedures, and perhaps a telephone modem to facilitate the extraction. Also, it is important to ensure that the OEI hardware and software is compatible with that of the source. (See “References for Further Reading” at the end of this Guide.)

Document Reviews

Eliciting information from document reviews is a completely different task, one which usually requires Inspections staff to develop a special document review form. This form identifies the exact information needed and provides away to record it directly on the form. It is helpful to think of this form as a “questionnaire” which Inspections staff use to “review” each document.

Guide #2 discussed the Inspection of interest-bearing accounts of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)-funded projects. One objective of this Inspection was to determine to what extent local projects were depositing their HHS funds into interest-bearing accounts, as advised by HHS. To answer this question, Inspections staff requested copies of official financial statements from local projects, and then completed a special form as they reviewed each document.

This form recorded basic information about each project, whether it had earned interest on its HHS funds, and, if so, at what rate and on what percentage of project funds. By completing a form for every local project, Inspections staff gathered the raw material for their analyses.

For this example, the documents were fairly simple and quite comparable, so the needed information was easy to identify and record. For more complicated documents, though, more complicated procedures are necessary. For example, an Inspection might need to determine whether Federal health regulations contain adequate encouragement to involve the private sector. Reviewing regulations for this information requires a more complex review form and more training for reviewers. (See “References for Further Reading” at the end of this Guide.)

Record Reviews

Record reviews are very similar to document reviews, in that they also require that Inspections staff develop and use a special form as they review individual-level records or files. The records or files, not written documents, become the “respondent” which Inspections staff “interview.” (See “References for Further Reading” at the end of this Guide.)

Personal Discussions

Personal discussions, on the other hand, must be conducted in quite a different fashion. Before planning the discussion, Inspections staff must make major decisions about the level of structure for both eliciting and recording information.

The ways in which Inspections staff elicit information from respondents can range from quite unstructured (e.g., “Tell me about the sanctioning process”) to quite structured (e.g., “What percentage of physicians were sanctioned in 1987?”). The former approach tends to encourage informal, conversational discussions, while the latter tends to encourage a more standardized exchange of information. Both of these approaches are appropriate under certain circumstances, and Inspection staff must choose the approach which best fits your particular Inspection.

Similarly, the ways in which you record information from respondents can also range from quite unstructured (e.g., taking notes verbatim) to quite structured (e.g., recording responses on a 5-point scale). Again, each of these approaches is quite appropriate under certain circumstances, and you must choose the approach which best fits your particular Inspection.

While some Inspections use quite unstructured discussions and others use quite structured discussions, most strike a balance between the two extremes. That is, most Inspections use discussion guides which specify fairly specific issues to discuss, but which still leave room for respondents to raise new issues of their own. Also, most Inspections record information in somewhat standardized fashion, but not typically in pre-established numerical categories. (See “Developing Written Instruments to Gather Information.”)

Regarding the actual discussions themselves, techniques vary with the type of discussion being conducted. Obviously a one-on-one in-person discussion will be conducted differently than a group discussion. (See “References for Further Reading” at the end of this Guide.) Also, Figure 1 contains a list of “DO’s and DON’TS of Conducting a Discussion” which has proven helpful in previous Inspections.

Figure 1
DO's and DON'TS of Conducting a Discussion

Preparing for the Discussion

- *DO obtain all necessary permissions before contacting any respondents. Some bureaucratic protocols may require clearance from a higher level before middle management or front-line staff are contacted.*
- *DO familiarize yourself with the general objectives, priority issues, specific questions, and reporting formats of all discussion and observation guides. This will prevent a stiff, formal style, and will allow a more casual, conversational approach.*
- *DO reserve adequate time for the discussion. Pilot test, under realistic conditions, all aspects of conducting the discussion to estimate accurately how much time is needed.*
- *DO be sure you are talking with the correct individual, one who is familiar with the inspection topic. If this cannot be determined before the discussion begins, ask that the correct person join the discussion in progress, or arrange a separate discussion with him or her afterwards.*

Beginning the Discussion

- *DO create an atmosphere that is casual, positive, and friendly. Put the respondent at ease by your relaxed, sincere interest,*
- *DO give your name and affiliation. Stress that you work for the Inspector General, not the involved program, and that you are looking at the issues in an objective, open manner. Remember that we do not make policies, but rather we make recommendations to decision makers.*
- *DON'T use words and speaking styles which are unfamiliar to the respondent. Use his or her language, not yours, and always be sure to define bureaucratic terms or acronyms.*
- *DO summarize the purpose and methods of the Inspection, without being overly detailed. Make respondents feel comfortable asking questions about the Inspection.*
- *DO, if appropriate, stress that all discussions are confidential and that the report will not identify individuals by name. However, in those instances when organizational anonymity cannot be guaranteed, do not make false promises.*
- *DON'T make any promises you can't keep. If a respondent asks a question about the program or his or her own benefits, at most promise only to telephone the person back with information you have learned.*

Continued

Figure 1

Figure 1 Continued

DO's and DON'TS of Conducting a Discussion

Discussing

- *DON'T omit issues or questions, unless specifically instructed to do so. Cover all issues with each respondent. Be prepared to skip around in order not to interrupt the normal flow of the discussion.*
- *DO listen very carefully to the respondent's responses. You must be able to record answers, follow up on comments, and respond to the emotion being conveyed.*
- *DON'T lead the respondent with comments such as "Don't you mean that. . ." or "Wouldn't you say..." Allow the respondent, and only the respondent, to say what he or she means.*
- *DO use probing techniques to elicit more information. Strive for encouraging pauses, but not embarrassing silence. Repeat or rephrase a question if necessary, but, when rephrasing, make sure to ask the same core question.*
- *DON'T be too quick to understand the response. It sometimes helps to play dumb and have the respondent explain further, especially on complex issues.*
- *DO paraphrase any responses which are especially important, in order to ensure that you understand exactly what was meant.*
- *DO ask for examples, specifics, copies of documents, etc. to flesh out the respondent's replies. Besides stimulating further information, these details will help later when writing the report.*
- *DON'T let the respondent's replies take irrelevant tangents. Keep him or her directed to the topic unless there is apparent value in the digression.*
- *DON'T let a respondent con you. Probe superficial or self-protective answers, while encouraging the respondent to level with you and "tell it like it is,"*

Recording the Discussion

- *DO take notes during the discussion, unless special circumstances require otherwise. Memory is usually not sufficient for recalling a long discussion.*
- *DO write legibly. Others will probably have to read and understand your notes. If at all possible, rewrite the responses on a new guide immediately after the discussion.*
- *DO record in the first person (e.g., "I don't trust the statistics?", not in the third person (e.g., "He doesn't trust the statistics").*
- *DON'T edit, summarize, or paraphrase unnecessarily. As much as possible, record respondent's words, not your own paraphrasing of them. Record particularly insightful, provocative, or juicy comments as verbatim as possible.*
- *DON'T allow awkward silences while you write. Learn to ask the next question while you are recording the last answer*
- *DO take the time to record important points. If necessary, say "That's very interesting. Could you repeat it so I can write it down accurately?"*
- *DO record extra, unexpected information such as emotional reactions or possible biases in the discussion guides.*

Continued

Figure 1

Figure 1 Continued
DO's and DON'TS of Conducting a Discussion

Ending the Discussion

- *DO thank the respondent for his or her time and assistance.*
- *DON'T specify what actions might be taken as a result of the Inspection.*
- *DO get permission to call back later if clarification or further information is needed.*
- *DO take the name and address of the respondent if a final report is requested. Send this information to your team leader.*
- *DO check for incomplete or unclear responses immediately after each discussion. Fill in only those responses of which you are certain, Leave the others blank or, if possible, telephone the respondent for clarification.*

Telephone Discussions

One technique which is becoming increasingly important for Inspections is telephone interviewing. This technique has its own unique advantages and disadvantages when compared to other types of personal discussions. (See OEI Technical Assistance Guide #2: Targeting the Information Needed.) The most important advantage is that more respondents can be contacted in less time than would be required for any other information-gathering technique.

One special type of telephone interviewing is computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). With this technique, Inspections staff wearing telephone headsets sit at computer terminals and dial (either manually or via the computer) a respondent's telephone number. When the respondent answers, Inspections staff use a discussion guide which appears on the computer screen.

This electronic discussion guide has two main advantages over paper guides. First, it allows Inspections staff to enter information directly into the computer as the respondent answers each question. This information is then immediately available for analysis, eliminating completely the need for coding from the discussion guide and the time this step normally takes.

The second advantage of CATI is that the computer program allows for automatic "branching" to different questions depending on the respondent's answers. For example, if a respondent has not experienced a certain procedure, Inspections staff mark "No" to the appropriate answer, and the computer program skips the next series of questions asking about those experiences. This not only saves time, but it also improves the flow of the discussion.

Inspections staff who have used CATI procedures recommend them highly for Inspections involving numerous respondents, especially beneficiaries of services. On the other hand, these same staff caution that not all CATI software programs can handle open-ended information and that Inspections staff must be competent in the accompanying data management package. However, these same staff predict that CATI-like procedures will undoubtedly be one of the "waves of the future" for Inspections.

Since telephone discussions are one type of personal discussion, the DO's and DON'TS of Figure 1 also apply to telephone discussions. However, telephone discussions are not conducted exactly like all other discussions, so Figure 2 lists some unique DO's and DON'TS for telephone discussions.

Figure 2

Unique DO's and DONT'S for Telephone Discussions

Preparing for the Discussion

- *DO take into consideration differences in time zones if the respondent is in a different State.*
- *DO use headsets. This prevents fatigue and helps to avoid office distractions.*
- *DO determine whether the present is a good time to have the discussion. If not, schedule a specific time for the same day or as soon as possible.*
- *DO try to limit telephone discussions with beneficiaries to less than 15 minutes, and to less than 60 minutes for other respondents, If the discussion will take longer than 15 minutes, ask to have that much time.*

Beginning the Discussion

- *DON'T give a lengthy explanation of the Inspection. Telephone respondents lose interest more quickly, and they need to begin the discussion sooner*
- *DO tell the respondent that you have some specific questions you want to ask. Make clear, though, that you are also interested in other information they believe is important.*

Discussing

- *DON'T ask long or complex questions. Keep the ideas simpler than would be possible during an in-person discussion.*
- *DO take extra care to probe the emotional content of the responses, since you cannot see the nonverbal cues which are obvious during in-person discussions.*

Recording the Discussion

- *DO tell the respondent that you will be writing down their responses. To avoid long silences, learn to ask the next question while still recording the response to the last one.*

Ending the Discussion

- *DON'T unilaterally continue the discussion past the time agreed to by the respondent. If more information is needed, ask for a few more minutes or if you can call back later.*

Mailed Surveys

Mailed surveys are similar to personal discussions in some ways, yet different in some important ways. They are similar in that mailed surveys also aim to elicit and record specific information from a single respondent. As a result, Inspections staff need to make the same decisions about what level of structure is best for eliciting and for recording the needed information.

Yet mailed surveys are quite different in that Inspections staff are not able to pursue interesting leads or gauge the emotion behind responses. For these reasons, surveys must be carefully designed to tap as much of the respondent's information as possible. Extensive and effective pilot testing (see below) is especially important for mailed surveys.

Since the credibility of a mailed survey is directly related to its response rate, it is important to ensure that as many respondents as possible complete and return their surveys. During the course of conducting several mailed surveys, Inspections staff have learned the following tips for increasing response rates:

- (1) Call the respondent before mailing the survey in order to alert him or her of its pending arrival and to confirm the correct mailing address;
- (2) Indicate in a cover letter that the OIG has the authority to request data and information of the sort, and that individual responses will not be identified in the report;
- (3) Set a clear deadline for returning the survey;
- (4) Send the survey by certified mail;
- (5) Provide an HHS self-addressed prepaid return envelope;
- (6) Provide a summary checklist whenever multiple documents are requested;
- (7) Call the respondent one week after mailing to ensure that the survey has arrived;
- (8) Call the respondent with a "friendly reminder" if the survey is one week past due; and
- (9) Keep file copies of all original letters, to quickly re-send a mailing if lost.

Since the use of mailed surveys is governed by the Paperwork Reduction Act, surveys to be completed by 10 or more respondents must receive prior approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Copies of the proposed survey(s) must be submitted to OMB, along with written justification why the information is required, why it is not available from other sources, and why particular respondent types were selected.

After submitting the application to OMB, Inspections staff generally wait a minimum of six to eight weeks before receiving approval. Also, there is always the possibility that the survey will not be approved. (See "References for Further Reading" at the end of the Guide.)

Observations

Techniques for recording *observations* can vary from quite unstructured to quite structured. On the one extreme, Inspections staff can simply record what they see, taste, smell, touch, or hear in a given situation. This completely unstructured approach, much like an informal conversation, can uncover useful information which the Inspections staff could not have anticipated in advance.

At other times, observational techniques sometimes resemble a structured discussion or even a highly structured mailed survey, in that Inspections staff know exactly what they wish to observe and how they wish to record it. In these instances, Inspections staff use an observation guide which contains the specific information of interest and room for recording it. (See “References for Further Reading” at the end of this Guide.)

Unobtrusive Measures

Recording *unobtrusive measures* is simple compared to the effort involved in designing what those measures should be. Once the measures have been determined, Inspections staff can simply weigh trash cans, photograph worn grass, examine floor tiles, or whatever other actions are needed. These findings are then recorded in whatever fashion is needed for the Inspection. (See “References for Further Reading” at the end of the Guide.)

Tests or Demonstrations

Calculating the results of *tests or demonstrations* is very similar to recording unobtrusive measures. Once Inspections staff have devised the appropriate test (e.g., telephoning a runaway youth hotline), they simply implement the test and record the outcome in whatever categories are needed. (See “References for Further Reading” at the end of the Guide.)

Case Studies

For case studies, Inspections staff generally use several of the techniques discussed above, depending on the needs of the Inspection. (See “References for Further Reading” at the end of this Guide.)

Developing Written Instruments to Gather Information

Almost every section above has alluded to written instruments which Inspections staff use to gather information. With the exception of computerized extraction of data, all Inspections methods use some written tool to elicit and record the information needed. Since the instruments for different methods have a great deal in common, and since personal discussions are the most common method used for Inspections, this section addresses discussion guides. Many of the lessons of this section apply equally well to developing instruments for other methods.

First, and most important, guides should be *neutral*. By the time these guides are developed, Inspections staff are beginning to develop some preliminary notions about the issues being studied, what may cause any problems, and what the possible solutions might be. However, these notions are strictly preliminary and could easily be completely inaccurate. For this reason, Inspections staff must take great pains not to word discussion guides in such a way as to elicit a particular response from respondents.

Discussion guides should also be concise—short and simple—because discussions beyond one hour generally yield diminishing returns (although there can be exceptions to this guideline). This time constraint requires Inspections staff to include only those issues directly related to the Inspection issues and to exclude peripheral issues. The judicious choice of issues to discuss also helps simplify later analysis of the information gathered.

However, guides should also be *comprehensive* enough to include all issues identified as important. Typically, different respondents can best speak to different issues. For example, a State program administrator could discuss the State's burden of Federal regulations, an issue about which beneficiaries would have no knowledge. On the other hand, beneficiaries know more about attitudes of provider staff than do administrators. Front-line provider staff might have information on both issues. For this reason, almost all Inspections use separate guides for each type of respondent.

Guides should also be *orderly* so they create a logical progression for the discussion. To establish rapport and create an atmosphere of trust, most guides start with somewhat open-ended issues which are not threatening to the respondent, and they save objectionable or especially sensitive questions for the last. This early confidence sets a helpful tone for the rest of the discussion.

Also, most guides group related issues together, in order to cover certain topics completely before addressing new ones. Most guides also include one final question such as “Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the issues we've discussed?”

Guides should also be *functional* and help Inspections staff to conduct the discussion. Staff need to introduce themselves and explain the purpose of the Inspection, and guides often include a brief introductory statement with this information. Usually this statement is not read verbatim, but its presence helps to ensure a clear and consistent explanation to each respondent.

Also, guides often contain transition statements to move the discussion from one area to the next. For example, “Now I’d like to ask you about the attitudes of local staff” helps Inspections staff to signal a new issue to discuss.

If certain issues are not relevant for certain respondents, the guide contains instructions to “Omit issues 7 and 8 for physicians,” for example. Other instructions remind Inspections staff to probe further (e.g., “If the respondent agrees, find out why”). Including these instructions in a consistent manner helps Inspections staff to use the guides as intended by team leaders.

A final way certain discussion guides are functional is their ability to facilitate analysis of the information gathered. For some Inspections, especially those requiring quantitative data and/or involving telephone discussions, staff use discussion guides with mostly multiple-choice questions and very few open-ended questions. This speeds the transfer of information from the guides to computer format and reduces the time and effort spent interpreting and coding the respondents’ answers.

Lastly, guides should be *flexible* enough to capture unexpected information. Content, formatting, and instructions should not lead to an overly structured, inflexible instrument. In practice, flexibility can be maintained by including enough open-ended items (with follow-up probes) and by allowing respondents’ answers to help guide the discussion. Also, it is important to set aside certain portions of the guide for Inspections staff to record their own observations, reactions, perceptions, etc.

Gaining Access to Specific Sources

Once Inspections staff develop the techniques to elicit and record the needed information, they need to gain access to the specific sources of that information. Accessing information depends on the specific types of sources which need to be accessed.

For existing data bases, reporting systems, individual-level records or files, and documents, the “gatekeepers” are typically both the top-level officials responsible for maintaining these sources and the front-line technicians who actually maintain the sources on a day-to-day basis. Each of these gatekeepers can hinder access if they wish, although in very different ways.

To access specific persons, Inspections staff usually need the permission of the individual if conducting discussions, making observations, or conducting a mailed survey (see the discussion of informed consent in the section below on ethics). If the individual is employed by an organization which has a vested interest in the Inspection, his or her supervisor also may need to give permission. While it is usually not difficult to obtain these permissions, it is important to follow proper protocol.

For direct experiences, Inspections staff sometimes need permission and sometimes they do not. Under certain circumstances, it might be appropriate to make observations, record unobtrusive measures, or conduct tests or demonstrations without the knowledge of the involved individuals. At other times, though, it might be necessary to obtain the proper permission to do so.

Usually the key gatekeepers are quite willing to cooperate with the needs of the Inspections staff to gather information. At times, in fact, these gatekeepers are other Federal officials, perhaps even the same officials who requested that the Inspection be conducted in the first place. In these instances, their cooperation is voluntary and enthusiastic.

Sometimes, though, gatekeepers are not as willing to grant access to their information, for a variety of reasons. In these instances, Inspections staff can rely on either informal encouragement or official pressure to gain the needed access.

Informal encouragement generally involves reminding gatekeepers of the legislative mandate of the OIG that the Inspector General is an agent of both the President and the Congress, and that it would be better if the gatekeeper did not prevent the Inspector General from accomplishing his official duties. Hopefully this encouragement will be effective, since it is always better to gain access in as cooperative a manner as possible.

If something more than informal encouragement is needed, there are more formal authorities contained in Public Law 94-505, as amended by Public Law 97-375, that set forth the basic responsibilities and authority for the Office of Inspector General.

For example, in the Inspection looking at physician ownership, attorneys in the OIG sent a letter to each physician involved in the study. The letter cited the Congressional mandate to conduct this particular Inspection, and it also listed the numerous existing authorities for the OIG to gather the information needed by Congress. The letter closed with a specific request for certain information to be immediately forwarded to the appropriate Inspections staff.

If this type of encouragement fails, Inspections staff can apply official pressure. In some instances, gatekeepers would like to cooperate by granting access but feel they need justification in case their actions are questioned in the future. In these instances, a “friendly” administrative subpoena can provide a legal justification for cooperating with Inspections staff. In other instances, gatekeepers are simply not willing to cooperate, so Inspections staff can issue an administrative subpoena for any needed information.

Pilot Testing All Information-Gathering Procedures

Once the Inspections staff have developed the procedures for eliciting and recording information and for gaining access, it is absolutely essential that these procedures be pilot tested before they are used in the full Inspection. Procedures which seem so logical when planned or on paper sometimes fail in unexpected ways when faced with real-life situations. If these failures occur during pilot testing, then Inspections staff can make the necessary revisions before full information gathering begins,

Pilot testing can reveal questions which cannot or will not be answered accurately, are not geared to the respondent's level of information, are not directly relevant to the Inspection's purpose, are illogical or unnecessary, require an unreasonable effort to answer, are embarrassing, ambiguous, or unfair, or represent an unbalanced line of inquiry. All of these are serious weaknesses, and none should be allowed to hamper the information gathering,

Unfortunately, pilot testing occurs at the busiest phase of an Inspection. Just when Inspections staff have finally finished all preparations and are eager to begin gathering the needed information, it is difficult to stop and take the time to conduct adequate pilot testing. All effort is toward gathering the information as soon as possible. However, it is important not to short-cut this very important activity.

There are three keys to effective pilot testing. First, pilot test all procedures, from the very first step to the last. That is, pilot test not only the obvious procedures such as downloading data, running tests, and asking questions, but also the less obvious procedures such as making an introduction, identifying the proper local agency unit, and writing down replies. Each of these steps contributes to a smoothly functioning Inspection, and each can produce headaches which could easily magnify.

Second, pilot test these procedures under as realistic a set of conditions as possible. That is, do not create ideal situations, but instead pilot test the procedure under typical, or even unusually difficult, conditions. Ideally, pilot test all the procedures several times, not just once, and under different conditions for each test. Otherwise the procedures may appear to work effectively, only to fail when used as planned.

This is not to say that procedures should only be tested under real-life conditions or not at all. While perfectly realistic conditions are vastly preferable to contrived conditions, there are times when Inspections staff simply do not have time to test every procedure. In those special instances, it may be necessary to use other methods such as testing the procedures on likely respondents, program experts, or even fellow Inspections staff,

Third, allow sufficient time between the pilot testing and scheduled field work to make the necessary changes in the materials, instructions, or procedures. Pilot testing is only helpful if the weaknesses identified can be fully corrected. Ideally, the corrected procedures should be pilot tested once again before field work, to ensure that the procedures now work as intended.

Based on his many years' experience with applied research, Alan Meyer, Ph. D., Deputy Regional Inspector General in Region H, OEI, has captured many of these lessons and more in his "Tips on Pretesting Discussion Guides," Figure 3 contains, with only minor modifications, his very useful advice.

Figure 3
Tips on Pilot Testing Discussion Guides

A. Purpose and Procedures

1. *Keep the practical purposes of the pilot test in mind.*

- A primary purpose is to test how well each question “works” under simulated or actual field conditions and to change or drop questions which don’t work well. A question “works” if it is clear to the interviewer what to ask and how to ask it, is easy for the respondent to understand, is simple enough for the respondent to process cognitively, produces the needed information, and enables the interviewer to record the needed information in a usable way,
- Another purpose is to prepare Inspections staff to be better interviewers. Staff who play the interviewer become familiar with the questions, any potential misunderstandings or other problems, and how to cope with them, Staff playing the respondent become more aware of how the questions are likely to sound to the real respondent and can, as a result, be more sensitive and effective interviewers.
- Another purpose is to test assumptions about who the appropriate respondents are and how to locate them, and how much time is involved in getting to the site as well as in conducting the discussion.

2. *The pilot test should be conducted in at least two stages.*

- . The first stage is among Inspections staff, with one person playing the respondent. The more that person is aware of how a respondent is likely to think and respond, the more realistic the pilot test will be. Major “bugs” and questions that clearly don’t work can be identified in this first stage.
- The second stage is to pilot test the guide with a real respondent selected from the universe of such respondents, but one that falls outside the sample. If at all possible, the pilot test should be conducted on-site, but telephone pilot tests may sometimes be necessary.
- If major revisions result from either of these pilot test stages, the revisions themselves should be pilot tested with a real respondent, if at all possible.
- . There should generally be as many pilot tests as there are drafts with major revisions.

B. Stage One: Playing the Role of the Respondent

1. *Put yourself in the mind set and role of the respondent.*

- . Assume that you only have a general idea of the study, that you don’t know the purpose of each question, and that you don’t know what types of answers are desired (other than what the question calls for).

2. *Hear each question as if for the first time.*

- Only go by the words asked you, not by your background knowledge of the question.
- Don’t have any written answer categories in mind unless you are given a “show card” or they are read to you as part of the question.

Figure 3 Continued
Tips on Pilot Testing Discussion Guides

3. *Make it a realistic and useful pilot test by being a little tough rather than too easy.*

- If a question isn't clear to you, say so. Don't rationalize that it is clear in order to make the discussion flow easier than it would in the field.
- If the question leads you away from the type of answer you know is wanted, follow the question and give a "wayward" answer rather than redirect it in the "wanted" direction.
- If a question appears unduly repetitive, say so rather than being a good sport.
- If a question is too blunt or sensitive from a respondent's point of view, react accordingly rather than let it pass.

4. *Make the pilot test realistic timewise.*

- Be a moderately talkative respondent, adding an anecdote or comment here or there, so the estimated time it takes to complete the discussion is accurate.

C. Stage Two: Conducting the Actual Pilot Test Discussions

1. *Encourage the respondent to critique the questions.*

- . In introducing the discussion, advise the pilot test respondent to note (either during or after the discussion) any questions that are not clear, are repetitious, or are difficult to answer. Advise him or her that any suggestions for improving the questions are welcome. When interviewing Inspections staff, it is probably best to have him or her write down such reactions for review after the discussion.
- There may be times when you want to pilot test a guide without announcing it as a pilot test. In this case, you would not ask for reactions or suggestions until after the discussion.
- After the discussion, ask the respondent if there were any questions which created problems of any sort. Use the respondent as a consultant: ask if any questions could have been improved and if there were other questions which should have been asked.

2. *Record the answers on the discussion guide.*

- . To provide a realistic pilot test of the instrument, record answers to the questions on the discussion guide. This will provide answers which can assess the usefulness of the questions, test whether the amount of space provided is adequate, and provide a more realistic test of how long the discussion will take.

3. *Record any lam-minute improvement.*

- If you spontaneously change any questions or the order of questions because you realize at the last minute that there is a better way to proceed, make sure you record the new question wording and/or indicate the new order of questions.

Ethical Considerations of Gathering Information

Many Inspections involve gathering information from individuals who are probably not even employees of the Federal government. These persons are often willing to assist as best they can, but the Inspection was not their idea and probably is not their highest priority. In fact, the Inspection may actually become a negative experience under certain circumstances. As a result, Inspections staff must consider carefully their ethical obligation to these persons.

Ethics is a complicated topic, and this short section cannot possibly do justice to all the ethical implications of any given Inspection. However, there are four different areas which Inspections staff should always consider:

- First, how ethical is the *focus of research*? Is the topic one which can be studied in good conscience? Or is the topic one that Inspections staff should not in good conscience help to gather the needed information (e.g., ways to discourage legitimate beneficiaries from using services)? Similarly, are there specific issues within a generally acceptable topic which simply should not be studied?
 - Second, how ethical is the *selection of participants*? Is it necessary for all persons to be informed that they are participating in an Inspection? If so, is it necessary for these persons to explicitly agree to participate? Are there types of persons who should never be contacted during an Inspection (e.g., children)? Is it ethical to gather information from persons who cannot realistically refuse to participate (e.g., prisoners)?
 - Third, how ethical are the *measurements* which will be taken? Do they needlessly invade personal privacy (e.g., surveillance, overly intimate questioning)? Do questions raise false expectations which cause pain when not realized? Are the methods themselves too intrusive (e.g., unwarranted drug tests)? Should participants be able to stop participating whenever they wish?
 - Fourth, how ethical are the *impacts on participants*? Is there an unacceptable risk of harm—physical, psychological, emotional, etc. ? Should participants be compensated if they are harmed? Should individual information be kept confidential? Should participants be given the results of the Inspection?
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Each of these four ethical areas is complex, and none of the questions in any area has a simple answer. To maintain the highest possible ethical standards, it is helpful to:

- (1) Be conscious of the possibility of ethical dilemmas at every step of the Inspection;
- (2) Examine each of these situations carefully, from several different perspectives;
- (3) Seek outside advice from persons not as committed to the Inspection;
- (4) Delay making decisions or taking actions as long as possible if those decisions or actions are dependent on an ethical dilemma not yet resolved; and
- (5) Constantly reconsider the ethics of every part of the Inspection. (See “References for Further Reading” at the end of the Guide.)

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